

Steamer ALPHA (1863-1900)

by R.R. Godden

In 1863 the Cunard Steamship Line launched the iron steamer SS ALPHA, 221.6' x 27.8' x 15.9', for service on the Nova Scotia to West Indies run. A sister ship, BETA, shared the run, each taking half the year. ALPHA was later sold to Pickford and Black of Halifax who employed her in the same capacity until 1898 when the lure of profits to be made in the Klondike gold rush trade decided them to transfer the ship to the West Coast.

After a rough 90-day voyage through the Straits of Magellan, during which four crewman were lost, the ship arrived at Victoria. The newspaper "The Colonist" of 6 July, 1898 recorded its arrival as follows: "A big white steamer with tall, graceful spars and neat appearance, with flush deck and comparatively little housework, is the Alpha, a steamer which yesterday arrived from Halifax." The ship was soon engaged, profitably, in transporting goldseekers and supplies to Alaska and returning both successful and destitutes to Victoria. The vessel was popular with its passengers and twice petitions of commendation were signed commending Captain J.D. Warren and officers for 'considerate treatment' accorded passengers.

In 1899 the owners felt encouraged by results to enlarge the cabin spaces. In April, ALPHA, under Captain Otto Buckholtz, former first mate, attempted to become the first vessel of the year to reach Nome, Alaska. Through rough waters and 650 miles of icefields ALPHA was pushed, only to arrive and find that the whaler JEANETTE had arrived the day previously. Her own arrival was greeted with eagerness by the citizens of Nome, hungry for both news of the outside world and the supplies carried in ALPHA's holds. By landing supplies at Nome which he had failed to declare to United States Customs, Captain Buckholtz made his ship liable for impounding as charges of smuggling were brought against it. A trial in Seattle resulted in a verdict of guilty and ended the ship's profitable Alaska run. To make port in American waters was to be subject to arrest.

ALPHA was transferred to the less glorious or profitable drudgery of hauling fish cannery supplies and canned fish cargoes to and from the Stikine River. Age and hard wear and tear of the rough northern waters and icefields had taken their toll and by the end of 1900 the owners had decided to send her to the Orient with a cargo in the hopes of finding a buyer for the ship. ALPHA cleared Victoria's Outer Wharf early in December, 1900 bound for Japan with 500 tons of salted fish. She turned about 200 miles at sea and hurried back to Victoria with rising water flooding her engine room and other repairs needed. Docked, no source of the leak could be detected and the owners claimed sabotage by opening of seacocks. The discontented crew, alarmed at the condition of the ship, sought to have her port clearance blocked until a survey was conducted. They were refused and told the only recourse they would have was to desert the ship and make their case at the consequent trial. When the appointed hour of sailing for Japan again arrived, half the crew, including the Chief Engineer and his Sec-

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ond were missing. The owners charged the missing crew with desertion and made public the allegation of deliberate flooding.

When the Chief Engineer, W. Gordon, appeared at the offices of "The Colonist" to refute the allegations he was arrested. At his trial he claimed that the ship was unseaworthy and thanked the judge for the 10-day imprisonment sentence which would exclude him from sailing in ALPHA. Another Engineer and crewmen were found with difficulty and early in the morning of 15 December, 1900 ALPHA again left port bound for Comox to coal for the voyage to Japan, with 700 tons of salted fish. En route to Comox, Captain F.H. Yorke, accompanied by one of the ship's owners, Samuel Barber, found his ship in a rising gale in the Gulf of Georgia. An overheating bearing caused a two-hour delay which was to have fatal repercussions.

Captain Yorke was unfamiliar with the approach to Comox Harbour which is through narrow, reef-fringed Baynes Channel between Denman Island and Vancouver Island. Its approach from the Gulf was marked by a lighthouse on small Yellow (now Chrome) Island lying immediately below the bulk of Denman Island. Darkness and winds obliterated the shoreline and it was Captain Yorke's intention to stand in until he could pick up the Yellow Island light to guide him to the Channel approaches. Too late he realized that he was approaching too close to Denman Island. The ship was swung but failed to clear a reef lying off Yellow Island. The bow struck and the South East gale winds and waves soon were forcing the ship round broadside to the reef. Captain Yorke and owner Barber remained onboard holding the ship bow with engine power until the engine room personnel were driven out by rising water. Twenty-eight of the 34 onboard escaped the ship onto Yellow Island by a line which had been swum to the island by a seaman named Anderson. Nine remained aboard as the ship began to pound to pieces as the wind and waves rolled it incessantly on the unyielding rock. The nine trapped aboard attempted to wait out the storm by climbing the foremast, clinging desperately as the ship was destroyed beneath them. At 1:05 a.m. the mast toppled plunging the men into the storm-tossed, wreckage-strewn waters. None survived.

At a coroner's inquest, Captain Yorke was found to have been negligent in attempting to make an unfamiliar port in bad weather, using charts that were 40 years old.

Footnotes:

The material for this article was derived from a combination of newspaper articles by well-known marine writer T.W. Paterson and diver Fred Roger's book "Shipwrecks of British Columbia". The two sources differ in some details, which may cause some inexactitudes in this article.

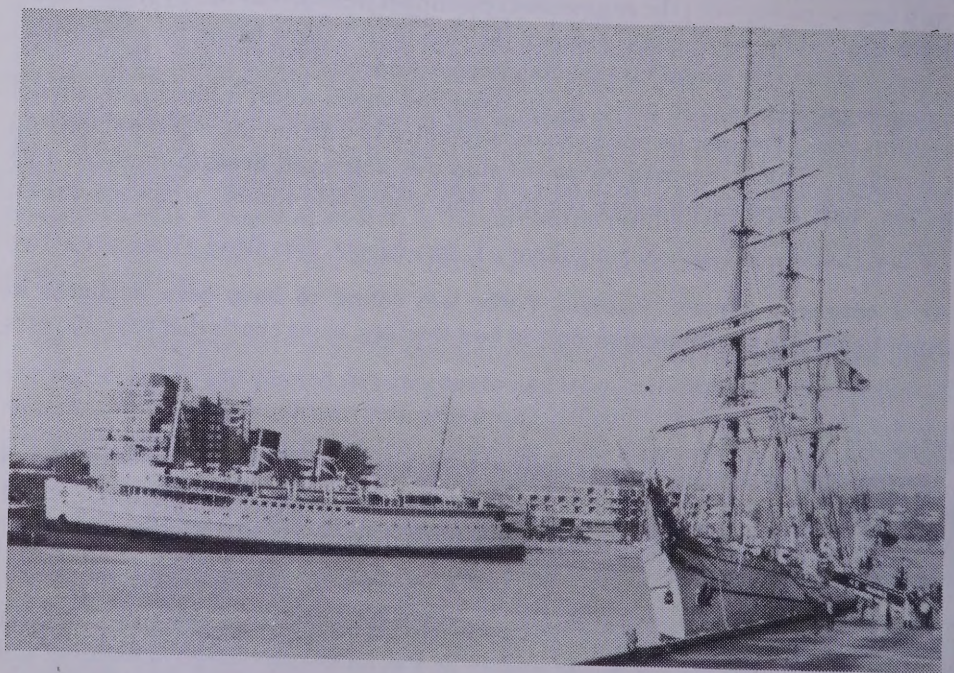
Fred Rogers gives an account in his book of diving on the wreck of ALPHA in 1961 and 1962. During the second diving session he was fortunate enough to discover and reclaim the ship's bell. Another group of divers in 1972 found and raised the ship's anchor which was destined to be erected on Denman Island, near the ferry landing, as a memorial to the ship and those who perished with her.

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Study in contrasts - The Portugese sail training vessel SAGRES II in Victoria Harbour, October, 1978, contrasts with the Victoria-Seattle passenger vessel PRINCESS MARGUERITE and the ultra-modern Laurel Point apartment and hotel complex behind it.